Why Paid Search Foundations Still Matter In An AI-Focused World

At this point in time, AI search products such as Google and Microsoft's PMax (and now AI Max) have firmly woven themselves into the toolkits of search marketers around the globe. But as many search marketers rush to not only test new products but also scale paid search activity, there is an increasing tendency to neglect the core elements of what makes a successful paid search account: audience, structure, and intent.

Within this article, I'll aim to throw paid search foundations back into the limelight, placing an emphasis on why core concepts remain important and highlighting the fact that AI products don't necessarily replace foundations but only serve to enhance them.

How We Got Here

It is, of course, important to stress that the shift towards AI prevalence has been a gradual one. From the early days of obsessing over match types and manual cost-per-click (CPCs) to Smart Bidding playing a greater role in finding customers across varying points of the user journey – we've come a long way to get here. With products such as PMax claiming to "do it all for you," we can see that the "hands on" approach of yesteryear has become less active.

With every step taken towards the current climate, we have handed a little more control to the machine. While this has allowed us to scale campaigns on a much greater level, when comparing the role of a PPC manager now to 10 years ago, the day-to-day tasks look exponentially different.

But as automation has increased, so has the machines' reliance upon clean and consistent foundations. AI features can only optimize based on what we feed it. If structure, signals, or audiences aren't clear, the machine has no concept of what "good" looks like. Because of this, AI hasn't removed the need for fundamentals; it's made them more important.

Structure Is Still Integral To Success

Automated systems and products such as PMax encourage greater levels of consolidation through feeding insights to the algorithm and letting it decide what works best for us. However, in practice, structure remains one of the biggest drivers around whether AI drives success or not.

PMax is not psychic. It doesn't have a full understanding of specific product margins your business may have, your product development lines, or your business' full commercial realities (yet!). The only way to do this is to make those distinctions clear. This is where structure comes in! A well-structured account provides boundaries for the machine to work with. It helps by:

- **Providing clean learning environments:** Grouping products and services in a logical manner helps to ensure that products such as PMax aren't trying to learn everything all at once. Through clear separation, you increase the likelihood of more accurate outcomes.
- **Maintaining budget control:** If everything is thrown into one campaign, it makes it increasingly more difficult to avoid under-performing products from cannibalizing budget.
- **Reducing conflicting intent:** When campaigns mix differing intents (e.g., providing varying conversion actions that are contradictory from a user journey standpoint), the machine receives much greater volumes

of noise. Through clear separation and delineation within a well-structured account, advertisers can reduce skewed data and improve performance.

Clear structure isn’t something to be ignored. It’s the backbone to improving AI performance. (Image from author, November 2025)

Audience Insight Remains AI’s Compass

When it comes to understanding people, human marketers will always hold a competitive advantage. Knowing why people convert, what motivates them, and ultimately, the understanding of human nature will always mean that human marketers have an intrinsic intuition that search features

such as PMax will never have. Acknowledging this, it’s key that humans feed quality customer insights into these platforms to ensure that the machine can gain a better understanding of what makes us tick.

As an example, a family car buyer and a luxury SUV buyer may both search for [SUV cars], but their motivations and expectations differ dramatically. AI can easily cluster this behavior, but it takes human insight to translate that behavior into effective positioning.

Taking this into account, the foundational understanding of a) what makes a solid audience grouping and b) how to implement said audience is again where foundational understanding comes into play. The strongest performing PMax campaigns are the ones filled with the richest insights. CRM, loyalty information, and higher intent user signals often significantly improve PMax’s ability to drive performance. AI products can only feed off information you provide, and those signals must be rooted in real audience understanding.

When you understand your audience deeply, AI has a stronger foundation to optimize from. When you don’t, you leave the machine to guess.

Intent (And Keywords) Still Drive Everything

It could be argued that automation has accelerated the death of keywords, but what it hasn’t done is decrease the importance of intent. Search has always been (and remains!) an intent-driven channel. PMax might automate placements and assets, but it still requires queries and signals to understand what someone wants.

We might now be seeing fewer search queries (much to my annoyance!), but the system is still learning from billions of

intent signals. Taking this into account, having a core, foundational understanding of intent enables you to:

Identify and prevent wasted spend. ALWAYS my ace card. Negatives and keyword exclusions remain critical in helping to guide AI products. Advertisers who refine intent signals almost always outperform those who automatically assume that 'leaving it to the machine' is the best approach.

Match creative with motivation. Understanding customer intent will help to ensure that you avoid over-generic ad copy and craft content that customers actually engage with.

Align landing pages with behavior. AI can send traffic to your pages, but if the content doesn't match user intent, account efficiency will be impacted.

A Whole New World

To quote the 1992 Disney classic "Aladdin," it really is a whole new world (pretty sure they had PMax in mind when writing that song…). However, while the further acceleration of AI products may have changed the mechanics of search advertising, what it hasn't done is make the fundamentals less important.

Audience insight still guides strategy. Intent still shapes relevance of content. Structure still shapes accuracy. These are not only essentials that have stood the test of time but will also provide a clear advantage to advertisers who can recognize their benefit.

The future of paid search truly isn't a case of fighting the machine; it's about ensuring we influence the algorithms by providing richer context and insight, in turn utilizing their ability to scale to further drive results.

More Resources:

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https://www.searchenginejournal.com/why-paid-search-foundations-still-matter-in-an-ai-focused-world/561416/